Houston Press

April 28-May 4, 1994 FREE

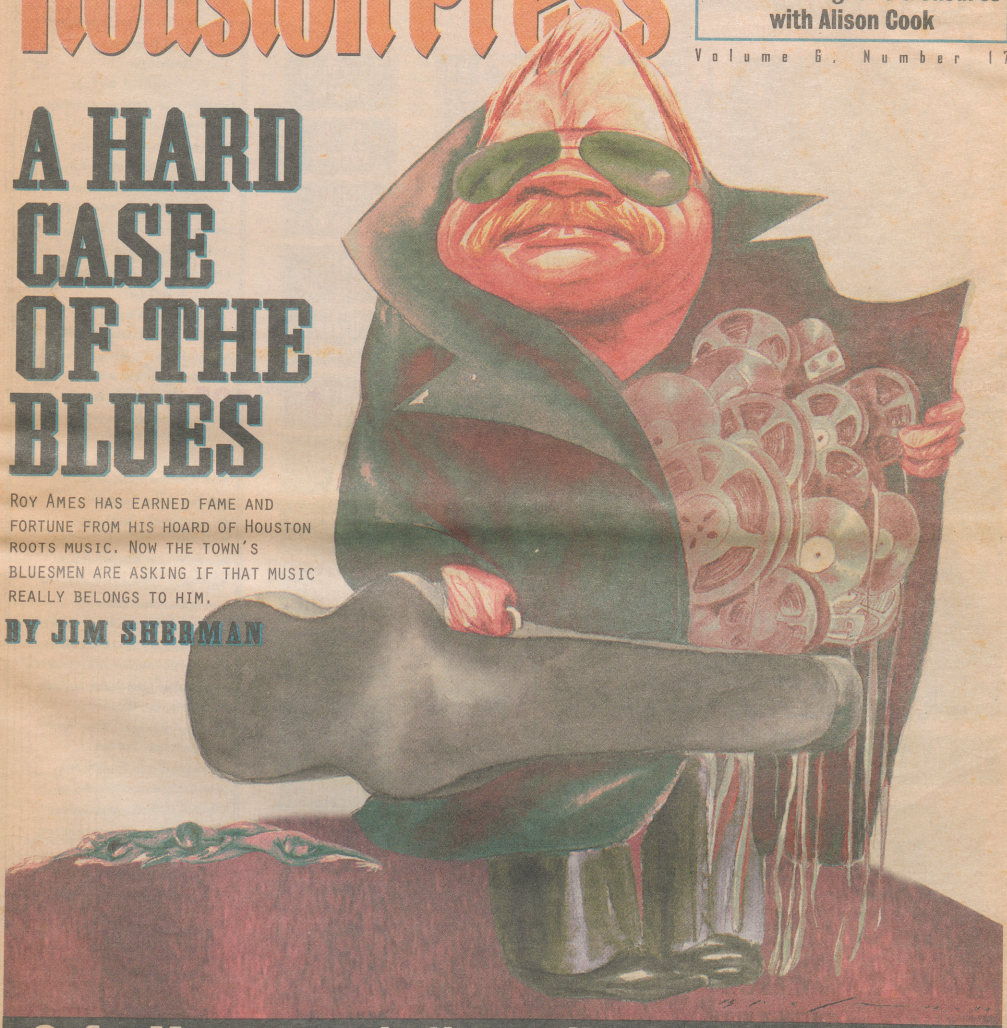
Volume 6, Number 17

Taking a tour of Teresa Rodriguez's treasures with Alison Cook

A HARD CASE OF THE BLUES

ROY AMES HAS EARNED FAME AND FORTUNE FROM HIS HOARD OF HOUSTON ROOTS MUSIC. NOW THE TOWN'S BLUESMEN ARE ASKING IF THAT MUSIC REALLY BELONGS TO HIM.

BY JIM SHERMAN



Cafe: Mesa reveals the perils of being precious

James Surls and the clever small-town art of Cleveland By Susie Kalil

Mamet and the Alley draw a line in the battle of the sexes with *Oleanna*

Film: The mild mind of Martin Lawrence

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Letters

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Rebuffed at the Buffet

"Mickey's back!"

So began Alison Cook's gushing review of Khyber, the new restaurant specializing in North Indian cuisine [Cafe, "Karma Veranda," April 14]. Indeed, Mickey's back was about all we saw of Khyber on our recent visit there, for though he was standing in the doorway as we entered the restaurant, he didn't deign to acknowledge our presence. And that's too bad, because after reading Ms. Cook's splendid review of Khyber, we couldn't wait to try the place ourselves. Well, we tried it, and we didn't like it. Fortunately, it didn't cost us a cent.

Here's what happened. On Friday, April 15, at about 1:15 p.m., we visited Khyber, anticipating a glorious repast — specifically, the lunch buffet. We looked around as we stood just inside the entryway, waiting to be seated, driven nearly to distraction by the splendid aroma.

After we'd waited a couple of minutes, a restaurant employee scurried up to us with a sheepish look on his face and conveyed a message something like this: "I'm sorry. We've had some unexpected visitors and we can't cook the food fast enough, so anything you order you'll have to wait 45 minutes to one hour for."

We were, of course, disappointed and more than a bit miffed, seeing as how the buffet was already set up, and the restaurant was only about half-full. But we chose not to make a scene, and exited gracefully.

As we exited, we once again passed Mickey. We would have expected him to offer his apologies for our disappointment. But maybe we just weren't the type of customer he wanted, though our money is as green as anyone else's.

Our experience at Khyber could have been a simple matter of there having been a dress code in place, except that our dress was consistent with that of other patrons. As for the "unexpected visitors" — we saw no evidence of president or pope, rock star or king.

If a restaurant begins turning away customers when it is at half-capacity during buffet service, something is either grievously wrong with its management, or perhaps it is displaying an elitism that has no place in this city.

Ron Kaye
Connie Schmidt
Houston

Lust Grows Up

So enlighten me. What is "sophisticated" and "adult" about a gentlemen's club? [News, "Don't Ask, Don't Tell," by D.J. Wilson, April 14.]

Adult? Well, maybe, if you only consider it chronologically. In grade school you tell toilet jokes, then comes snapping bra-straps. When you are legally an adult — that is, 21 years of age — you can pay a real live woman to dance nude at your table! Deep.

Oh, and while we're on the subject, who says they're gentlemen?

Susan Moore
Houston

Credit Due

Alison Cook hit a nail squarely with the review of Berryhill's Hot Tamales [Cafe, "Fish Tacos of the Gods," March 24]. One of the names missing from the "proprietors for whom the little things matter" was that of Yvonne Heizer, whose ideas and touches abound.

Reflected from the back door are her many years' experience, attention to detail and unflagging devotion to quality. All this in addition to great food!

Olga H. Thompson
Houston

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Postmaster: Send address changes to Houston Press, 2000 West Loop South, Suite 1900, Houston, TX 77027.

Subscriptions may be purchased for $30 (one year) or $50 (two years) for third-class mail in the United States. Payable in U.S. currency. Mail to: Subscriptions/Houston Press, 2000 West Loop South, Suite 1900, Houston, TX 77027.

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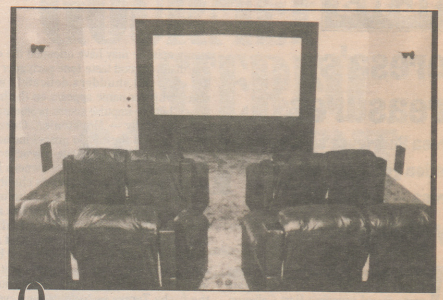
A Cold Blooded Killer



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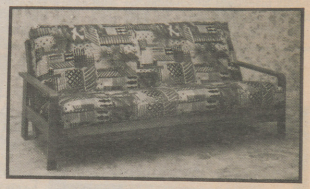

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News

L'affaire Rodriguez has stirred up our dormant rubophobia, that Texas dread of being caricatured as overdressed buffoons with more money than good sense.

Teresa's Treasures

Teresa Rodriguez's up-for-auction goods tell a lot about Teresa — and Houston

By Alison Cook

Ambivalence seeps like an uneasy vapor from the subdued cocktail-party crowd prowling Hart Galleries' vast second floor this Tuesday night. Everyone's motives are suspect. Ostensibly the odd gumbo of academic, artsy and cafe-society types has paid $50 a head to attend an auction preview benefiting the University of Houston art department. But beneath the gathering's respectable surface lurks a baser agenda: the long-awaited opportunity — irresistible to any self-respecting voyeur — to inspect the assembled worldly goods of Teresa Rodriguez, defrocked Houston social climber, alleged con artist and shopper extraordinaire.

Spread out beneath the gallery's unforgiving lights is the glittering trove of a confirmed magpie. Sparkly evening gowns, shimmery furs, twinkling jewels and handbags; shiny sterling, faceted crystal, antiques and china agleam with gilt. From a lustrous mahogany dining table big enough to apply for statehood dangles a foreboding cardboard talisman. "WARNING," the tag advises. "United States Government Seizure."

It's a reminder of the discomfiting circumstances surrounding not only this high-society preview, but also the four-day auction that begins this Friday. The Internal Revenue Service, having confiscated Rodriguez's effects from her Houston townhouse and Mexia ranch, is now selling them off to repay her $1.2 million tax debt and the court costs of her involuntary bankruptcy; if any money is left over after this and two previous auctions, it will go to the hundreds of investors — many of them affluent and highly pissed-off Houstonians — Teresa allegedly soaked for up to $80 million.

To wring a charity party from such a messy episode may have offended the city's guardians of good taste (one partygoer rolls her eyes and shudders delicately when asked why her name appears on the invitations), but the impulse seems profoundly — and cheerfully — Houstonian. Ours is a town in which the can-do gospel includes a mandate to make lemonade whenever presented a lemon, and gallery owners Jerry and Wynonne Hart, themselves charity-circuit fixtures, were dispensing gallons of it in the face of national publicity that has made many Houstonians cringe. L'affaire Rodriguez has stirred up our dormant rubophobia, that ancient Texas dread of being caricatured as overdressed buffoons with more money than good sense. Depictions of the flashy Teresa as "ostentatious even by Houston standards" have hardly fostered a party mood; nor, for that matter, has seeing Houston portrayed as a greed capital in such organs as the *Washington Post* and *Philadelphia Inquirer*.

No doubt that accounts for a certain bemused hesitance on the part of the several hundred partygoers, who are notably circumspect about ogling Rodriguez's stuff. They wander among the good, the bad and the just plain improbable, clucking over her nesting pairs of polychromed porcelain ducks, lifting the lids of her unused Neiman's picnic baskets, eyeing her beloved herd of costly crystal frogs. Near the more personal artifacts — the brave fur flings, the grandiose set of Louis Vuitton luggage, handles slightly worn from use — a lugubrious note creeps in. It is as if a window suddenly has opened on an interrupted life.

A stir runs through the crowd at the arrival of Betty Shindler, the Best-Dressed socialite who has been the most vocal of Rodriguez's unhappy investors. She wears a whispery cream suit — the same one she donned for a *People* magazine photographer, observes an uncharitable soul, who snipes, "She's gotten so much mileage out of this story!" Shindler looks spooked. "I've seen Teresa wearing so many of these things," she says, regarding the display cases crammed with Chanel handbags of the sort that hangs from her own shoulder, and the eerie tableau of headless mannequins sporting Rodriguez's linebackeresque wardrobe in size 16-18 petite. "It's almost like she's here in the room."

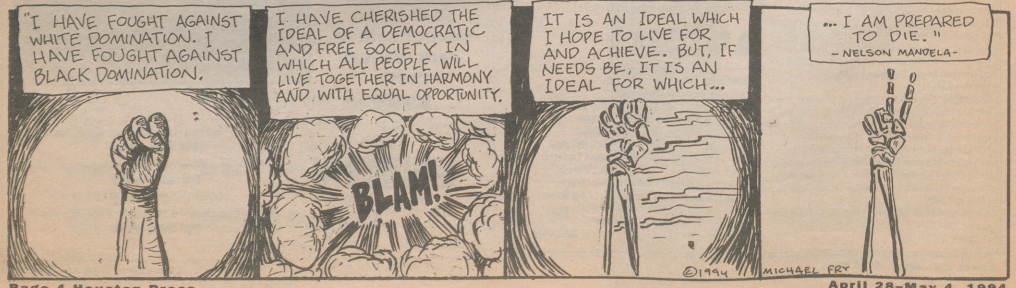
Her diffidence is understandable. The high-priced handbags, the Ungaro suits, the intricately pleated Mary McFadden gowns were the props Rodriguez used to woo wealthy Houstonians such as the Shindlers to invest in nonexistent government minority contracts that promised eyebrow-raising returns of 20 to 40 percent. When the hotsy-totsy Costume Institute brought Oscar de la Renta to town and Teresa bought his ruffly black ballgown — worth a cool nine thou and now dressing one of the Harts' mannequins — the message she telegraphed was, "I'm one of you."

F. Carter Smith

A taxing end: Teresa's furs await buyers on their plastic hangers.

And in a fundamental sense, she was. Gathered for auction, the Rodriguez collection is an encyclopedia of the pricy names that confer instant status (and buy quick acceptance) among Houston's flashier monied set. Baccarat, Frette, Steinway, Limoges, Hermes. Louis Vuitton. Neiman-Marcus. Cristal champagne. Pop novelist Judith Krantz could not have dreamed up a more brand-conscious universe than Teresa spun for herself as the millions rolled in. Her shopping sprees were organized on the "less is a bore" principle dear to the Houston aesthetic: everywhere one's eyes light at the auction preview, Rodriguez's passion for ornament explodes. Bearing fields of marble, her furniture perches atop ball-and-claw feet. Her battalions of crystal stemware are cut and colored and gilded to a fare-thee-well. Her ice-cream scoop boasts a preposterously fancy sterling handle, and even her silver pattern, Reed and Barton's Francis I, is as ornate as silverware gets. If a unifying thread runs through this assemblage, it's that there's nothing that can't be improved by the addition of a little gold. Or a lot.

"More is more" (that less-is-a-bore corollary) emerges as another axiom of TeresaWorld; her hobby was buying in multiples. In a climate where you have to stretch a point to wear furs, she accumulated 24, from a $60,000 sable to a scruffy-looking nutria; from manifold minks to a bizarre blue-and-white striped Giorgio di Sant'Angelo number. Her sundry sets of china, costing up to $2,500 per five-piece place setting, are so epic that the auctioneers split them up to make them more attractive to buyers. Her stash of Francis I silverware passeth human understanding: counting service ware, there are



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almost 700 pieces of the stuff. She even felt the need to lay in 36 amber-stemmed crystal brandy snifters at $116 a pop. Duck down, and you can glimpse the high-status Bergdorf-Goodman price tags still affixed to their bottoms.

What does it all mean? Greed is the easy answer; indeed, it is the subtext of Rodriguez's supposed schemes, her investors' gullibility, the auction itself. But looking around the room, something deeper and darker seems to be at work, a hoarding impulse that goes far beyond Rodriguez's need for socially acceptable props. Much of her crystal and china was squirreled away in the custom closets of her faux-French townhouse, located five short blocks (and a world away) from the main gates of River Oaks. Much of it was never even used. Given the poor-girl El Campo upbringing she has described, the fact that so many of her acquisitions have to do with hunger and thirst seems strangely poignant.

Contemplating her handbags, 110 strong, it is easy to imagine a woman who must have devoted significant blocks of time to shifting her valuables from one container to another. The Elizabethans would have recognized the Rodriguez purses as a metaphor; the "true bidders" the Harts aim to attract by imposing a $15 auction admission and throwing a charity preview party recognize the bags only as a bargain. Toward the end of the evening, socialites Susan Glesby and Jeanie Kilroy are seen appraising a tiny black-satin cylinder by Chanel, and then — more lovingly — one of the $11,400 Barry Kieselstein-Cord bags that Rodriguez's erstwhile chum Elyse Lanier has been known to carry, its golden alligator-head handles and clasp lending it a carnivorous air.

"Is that a Judith Lieber?" asks a striking woman with angled silver hair and big jet earrings. She makes a beeline for the purses, her own Lieber jewelbox swinging on her arm. It is legendary Houston retailer Ella Pryor, here on a busman's holiday with her daughter, Judy Pryor Otto, who runs the family store. Regret and relief mingle on their faces. "Judy would have liked her as a customer," teases Ella. "If it wasn't other people's money," qualifies Judy. "The woman knew how to shop," she finishes, looking slightly wistful.

The ride may well be over for Teresa, not to mention for the Houston retailers who outfitted her dream world. (Some, like the dealer who supplied a country French writing table among the items now on the block, are still waiting to be paid.) But this being Houston, hope springs eternal. At the close of the party, the very social Harriet Rosmarin Gertner, who with her relatively new husband practically lives on Tony's central aisle, stands before a locked jewelry case. A gargantuan jade butterfly is produced, one of three pieces that failed to sell at a recent New York auction of Rodriguez's jewels (what did go brought $2.3 million). While a local doctor squints at the butterfly through a jeweler's glass — "That brown diamond is in very good condition," he opines — Gertner talks jewelry; dozens of headless Teresa dummies look on.

"I'm a jeweler's daughter, so I started collecting early," Gertner volunteers, flashing an ice-cube-size ring to rival any of Teresa's. Gertner's neck is encased in a wide pearl choker; her wrist bears a big diamond bracelet; even the buttons on her brightly flowered suit are jeweled. She speaks of David Webb and Piaget and a diamond-pave watch a friend of hers bought at another bankruptcy auction. "And I'll tell you something," she informs her new friends without so much as a shred of ambivalence. "If I'd been married a few more years, *I'd* have bought that watch!"

It's a sentiment that Teresa Rodriguez, the uninvited guest whose presence hovers nearby among the mannequins, would have understood. HP

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A HARD CASE OF

JIMMY "T-99" NELSON: "I HAVEN'T RECEIVED ONE DIME, NOT EVEN SESSION MONEY."

STORY BY JIM SHERMAN
PHOTOGRAPHS BY STEVE SATTERWHITE

Three months ago, Glendora Wilson walked home from work to find a blues fan standing on the porch of her Third Ward home. The fan was there to show her an ad in *Living Blues*, the world's most respected journal of African American roots music. It was an ad she might well be expected to have an interest in, given that it featured a recording by her late husband, songwriter Harding "Hop" Wilson.

Promoted in the advertisement was a CD that had caused a sensation in the blues world. *Houston Ghetto Blues* was only one of two known recordings by Hop Wilson, the semi-legendary composer of a song, "Black Cat Bone," that had been the nucleus of a Grammy-winning album by Albert Collins, Johnny Clyde Copeland and Robert Cray. Wilson himself had rarely been heard by blues fans; his first experiences with Houston's recording industry had so embittered him that he refused repeated opportunities to put his work down on vinyl, preferring the obscurity of playing neighborhood dives.

So the release of a fresh Hop Wilson disk might well **Continued on page 8**

SE

JOE "GUITAR" HUGHES: "THAT CROOK, I CALL HIM THE TEXAS MUSIC RAPIST."

OF THE BLUES

ROY AMES AND HIS HOME COOKING RECORDS HAVE SPREAD THE SOUND OF HOUSTON BLUES AROUND THE WORLD. SOME LOCAL MUSICIANS ARE WONDERING WHY HE HASN'T SPREAD MORE OF THE WEALTH AS WELL.

Case of the Blues

Continued from page 6

be expected to be news. But less expected is whom it would be news to. Glendora Wilson looked at the ad placed in front of her with puzzlement. She was, to put it mildly, surprised to learn that her husband's last recording had been leased to companies on at least three continents since his death. No, nobody had asked her about it. No, nobody had told her about it. No, she had received "not one dime" for any rights to any of the music on the CD. No, she admitted, she wasn't sure that she *had* any rights to any of that music. But, again no, nobody had bothered to check with her about those rights either.

Given that the CD had been released by Rounder Records, a label with a long history in folk and roots music and a label generally regarded with respect, Glendora Wilson's ignorance about what was happening with her late husband's heritage might seem odd. But for anyone with much knowledge of the scuttlebutt of the Houston music business, a possible answer to the question of why Glendora Wilson remained in the dark could be found by looking on the back of a copy of *Houston Ghetto Blues*. Printed there is the simple declaration, "Original production by Roy C. Ames."

Ah yes, Roy Ames. He, too, has a long history in roots music. But as for respect... well, that's another issue altogether.

LEONARD "LOW DOWN" BROWN: "HE SAID, 'WELL, IF YOU DON'T LIKE WHAT I'M DOING, SUE ME.'"

Roy Ames' name is one that, until recent years, was little-known outside of Houston. But the advent of digital technology, coupled with a trendy fascination with the roots of rock and roll, has made vintage blues recordings more accessible today than when they were first recorded. Fifteen years ago, the blues sections of most record stores consisted of a handful of LPs by the few artists who had "made it" to even nominal commercial success — B.B. King, T-Bone Walker, Billie Holiday, Albert Collins, Leadbelly. Today, as the baby boom generation matures, many are discovering the men and women who inspired Eric Clapton, ZZ Top, Janis Joplin and other "classic rockers." In Europe and Japan, where the interest in American culture goes much deeper than the popularity of Madonna and Michael Jackson, being a blues fan is a scholarly endeavor. Around the world, old recordings, remembered only by eccentric collectors, are suddenly big business.

CDs by generations of blues artists now fill entire aisles in stores that once made only a token effort to offer this uniquely American music. From deep in the vaults of major recording labels and small local studios, master tapes that were last used to create nearly forgotten 78's, 45's and LPs are taken out, dusted off, digitally remastered and released once again, this time on compact disk.

This rebirth of the blues has turned attention to Houston, the source of many previously little-known blues masters, and to Roy Ames, whose Houston-based Home Cooking records has become a hotbed of rediscovered blues music. According to local blues historian Aaron Howard, who last year wrote a short, laudatory profile of Ames for *Public News*, Ames has up to 8,000 master tapes stored at his home and office, tapes that contain performances by a plethora of Gulf Coast artists. With this vast reserve of master tapes to either put out on Home Cooking or lease to American and foreign labels, Roy Ames is currently one of the most successful people in the Houston music business. In addition to vintage and current recordings, Ames offers record stores and mail-order customers a wide selection of concert videos and posters, and does a lucrative business leasing the rights to archival photographs to recording companies for cover art.

Ames, a 57-year-old native of Beaumont, now lives and works in West University, where his Home Cooking records operates out of a postwar bungalow on Community Drive. He tools around town in a Jaguar, his signature car — and a sign, perhaps, of how far he's come from his east Texas origins. Ames' history in Houston recording is long and, at least as he tells it, important. In many ways, he's a caricature of a common feature on the Gulf Coast music scene: the independent record producer who lets nothing stand in his way. Like a Huey Meaux or a J.D. Miller or, most famously, a Don Robey, Ames has been portrayed as a man who got unknown music out to the masses, even if he occasionally cut a corner here and there to do it.

Actually, he seems to have been a fairly minor player until recent years. Roy Clifton Ames, a.k.a. "Sweets," a.k.a. Mark Brunstein, a.k.a. John Jennings, a.k.a. Roy Clifford Ames, has said he got into the music business in 1959, when he was helping his father run a car dealership in Beaumont. In his interview with Aaron Howard, Ames said that a customer mentioned how he had been recording pop singers with Norman Petty of Buddy Holly fame out in Clovis, New Mexico, and that that talk turned the young Ames' attention from motors to music. Whether that epiphany is true or created, it's clear that Ames has been in the Texas music business since the late 1950s. At some point in the early 1960s he started Aura Records, which produced very few sides and goes unmentioned in the standard references to recording history. By the mid-1960s, Ames was managing a young albino guitarist from Beaumont named Johnny Winter. By that time his record company was called Cascade, and it released two records in 1965 or 1966 by bands called the Great Believers and the Insight. Both groups featured Winter on lead guitar.

In addition to managing several emerging artists for short periods of time and producing a handful of local-label 45's, Ames worked in varying capacities for several record distributors. He claims to have worked for Motown, and his start in the music business may have been with King Records, where he says he was sales manager for Texas. A few years later, Ames was working as a record promoter and distributor for Don Robey's Duke/Peacock label, which dominated the Houston recording business for two decades.

Roy Ames worked in several places and did many things. But one thing he did consistently was never pass up an opportunity to acquire master tapes of Gulf Coast artists, among them Hop Wilson, tapes that have since turned up on blues albums and compilations worldwide.

For about a decade, from the mid-'70s to the mid-'80s, though, most of those tapes lay fallow while Ames dealt with other issues.

On September 16, 1974, a federal grand jury in Houston indicted Roy Ames on one count of conspiracy and ten counts of mailing obscene material. In early 1975, Houston police served search warrants on Ames' warehouse and home. As a result of those raids, Ames was arrested March 11 and charged with two counts of sexual abuse of a child. Another warrant to search for clues to Ames' involvement with mail-order child pornography was served April 5 at the Travelodge on Heights Boulevard. Six charges of compelling the prostitution of a minor were filed against Ames on June 16, 1975.

Dusty files from those cases are filled with lengthy motions filed by a succession of legal firms seeking to suppress evidence and have charges dismissed. To an extent, it worked. The eight charges filed against Roy "Sweets" Ames by the State of Texas in 1975 were dismissed March 1, 1979. Reasons for the dismissal included Fourth Amendment problems with the search warrants and the difficulty of getting teenage boys to testify about being victims of sexual abuse.

But another possible reason is that Ames was already serving time in federal prison. Since November 23, 1975, Roy Ames had been in a sex-offender therapy program at the federal prison hospital in Springfield, Missouri after pleading guilty to one count of conspiracy and three counts of distribu-

tion of obscene material in the mail. After being transferred to a prison in Big Spring, Texas, Ames was indicted on mail-order child-porn charges by a federal grand jury in Springfield, Massachusetts in 1981. Those charges resulted in a five-year sentence at Latuna Federal Prison in El Paso. Ames was paroled from Latuna on December 19, 1986. Since then, aside from an arrest on suspicion of DWI in 1990 — charges that were later dropped — Ames has steered clear of the criminal courts. The federal Parole and Probation Agency lists his current parole status as "inactive." His parole officer, Mark Gerlich, at the Houston office, said, "There are some unresolved issues and therefore we have not discharged his case." He refused to elaborate.

While Ames was fighting his battles over pornography and sexual abuse, he was also founding Home Cooking records, which released some LPs as early as 1975. Records at the Harris County Courthouse, however, indicate that Ames didn't register the company until August 1990. At the same time, Ames also registered a business known as Clarity Music, giving no address except the same post-office box as Home Cooking's. (Clarity Music, as it happens, claims publishing rights to all 18 songs on Hop Wilson's *Houston Ghetto Blues* as well as to hundreds of other songs written and recorded by dozens of Gulf Coast artists.)

Ames had already released three Home Cooking CDs in 1988 — by T-Bone Walker, Juke Boy Bonner and Lightnin' Hopkins — that were credited with revitalizing the label and pointing to its new emphasis: little-known Houston blues.

By the early 1990s, the first three CDs on the Home Cooking label had been joined by dozens of others. American labels had joined the European and Asian collectors' labels eager to lease masters from Ames. Rare posters featuring moments great and extremely obscure in Texas music history were offered to eager fans. It seemed that Ames, out of prison, had found his niche. But according to more than a few blues musicians, Ames' niche was carved out of their hides.

Of course, allegations of recording ripoffs are literally as old as the blues itself. W.C. Handy, the composer of "Memphis Blues," recounted in his autobiography how he was swindled out of the rights to the first popular blues song ever copyrighted. The play *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* centers on black artists at the mercy of the recording industry in Chicago in the 1920s.

ROY AMES WORKED IN SEVERAL PLACES AND DID MANY THINGS. BUT ONE THING HE DID CONSISTENTLY WAS NEVER PASS UP AN OPPORTUNITY TO ACQUIRE MASTER TAPES OF GULF COAST ARTISTS.

But proving the allegations has often been difficult, in part because blues artists have not always paid the keenest attention to contracts, and in part because the morass of recording laws can make some things that might appear unethical in fact perfectly legal. But while Ames' conduct as he has moved toward the top of the blues business might be acceptable in a court of law, many of the performers he has worked with have no problems saying that in the court of human decency, his conduct was unacceptable in the extreme.

Johnny Winter, who attributes his success to getting out of Houston and moving someplace where a musician would be treated fairly, was eager to discuss his former manager (and a man who is still releasing Johnny Winter's music). "Roy Ames is the worst," Winter says. "When I see Roy's name on [an album], I know it's going to be trouble. If he put it together, nobody is going to see a cent of it. Except him, that's for damn sure. This guy has screwed so many people it makes me mad to even talk about Roy. It's hard for me, my lawyer always says you'll never get anything from the guy. He's so dishonest and so hard to track down that even if you sue him and win, getting the money is a whole different thing."

A much more recent addition to Home Cooking's roster is Leonard "Low Down" Brown, a talented songwriter whose blistering guitar skills keep him busy around Houston's club scene.

"I first met Roy Ames through Pat O'Brien. Pat talked him up pretty good," says Brown. "I met with him and we didn't get around to talking about any business, but he was saying that he had a recording studio, he was talking as though Rampart Studios was his. So we were going to go in at first and get a sound. We went in and laid down four or five tunes. These were all original songs. It was just a rough sketch, what you call a scratch track. Roy did not want to come to any contractual terms, he kept sidestepping the issue and everything. I just abandoned the project. The next thing I know, he had put it on some kind of CD. I was on a gig at League City and somebody said check this out. I couldn't believe it. I saw me, Al Bettis and Little Junior One-Hand. It said, *Texas Guitar Greats Volume 2*. I called Roy and asked him about it. I said, 'Roy, you're using my music and you have no agreement, and you're not paying me any royalties.' He said, 'Well, if you don't like what I'm doing, sue me.' And then he hung up on me."

Brown is harsher with his own work than the cruelest critic. "I'm ashamed because it's bad stuff, a really poor, slapped-together piece of work."

For years, Ames has successfully played on the harsh reality that legal recourse is beyond the reach of many of those who created the music he sells. Brown says, "He looks for people that he thinks are up and coming, he looks for people that don't know much about the music business, or that are really poor people, couldn't possibly hire a lawyer. He leads them down the path."

That view was repeated by one of the few people who declined to go on the record about Ames. That former acquaintance explained, "A lot of this stuff dwells around people who are either dead or don't know any better. When you first meet the guy he's such a charmer, he's very gracious, he's very helpful. But if he finds a way that he can make money out of something you have, he'll fuck you faster than you can turn around."

Alan Govenar, the author of the seminal Texas music book *Meeting the Blues*, also expressed concern about being identified as saying negative things about Ames. Govenar was initially reluctant to speak for attribution about Ames, but after a long pause, the dean of Texas blues historians said in a scholarly and measured tone, "Based on my research, Roy Ames had questionable dealing with the musicians that he recorded. No contracts with these musicians to my knowledge have ever been made public. It is difficult to understand how

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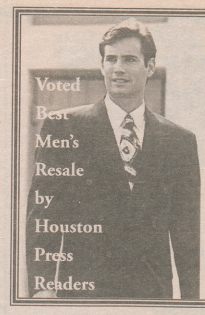

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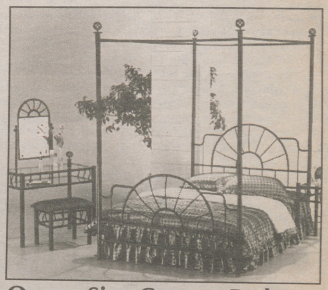

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Case of the Blues

Continued from page 9

he has been able to, since the death of so many of these great Houston musicians, release these recordings. Why were they never released during their lifetimes?"

One artist whose works appeared on Home Cooking after his death and without his family's knowledge was Weldon "Juke Boy" Bonner. Bonner's daughter, Deborah Nicholson, had never heard of Roy Ames or Home Cooking in 1991, when she went searching for some of her father's albums. "I saw these two new albums. One was a memorial-type thing and the other one was just some of his songs," she says, "and I saw they were put out in '89. I said, 'Who put this out?' I called [Ames] and he said he wouldn't have no kind of way of knowing about the royalties, because he had sold the records outright, my dad had sold the music. We weren't entitled to any more. He said something about how he had told my dad to get his business life together so he could get royalties."

Ames had good reason for portraying himself as a sorrowing friend of Bonner's, and by extension, of his family. According to Nicholson, "He was asking me if I knew anything about my dad having tapes that weren't published yet." Perhaps envisioning more unexpected discoveries, Nicholson declined to offer Ames any more of her father's music. Then Ames had another request: "He wanted to know if I had any kind of movies or pictures. He's off into something."

The something Ames is off into is Gulf Coast blues memorabilia. Along with music, Home Cooking offers videos and posters, among them a promotional showbill advertising Elvis Presley's 1954 appearance at Cook's Hoedown Club. The posters were originally sold by Home Cooking for between $150 and $200, and Elvis collectors are now buying them on the memorabilia circuit for over $500. Some collectors, though, have begun to wonder about their authenticity, pointing to their surprising crispness for posters some 40 years old, and also pointing to a curious resemblance between the posters and an ad that can be found on *Houston Post* microfilm at the Houston Public Library.

Another poster offered by Home Cooking — it's not made clear in the ads whether the poster is an original or a reprint — advertises a show at the legendary Double Bayou roadhouse in Anahuac in 1956. T-Bone Walker was the headline act, and below that in large type is the name later used by someone who, in 1956, was one of the hottest of the Shady's Playhouse teenage guitar-slingers — Joe "Guitar" Hughes, who appears on many of Home Cooking's foreign and domestic recordings.

Anyone who asks Hughes about Roy Ames should first take whatever precautions seem prudent when dealing with a *very* angry man. "That crook! I call him the Texas Music Rapist," he explodes. "He's got some posters out on me and T-Bone Walker that are phonies. I called him and he tried to convince me they was real, like I supposed to be Winnie the Po-Po or something. I told him, in the first place, I never played Double Bayou with T-Bone, in the second place I didn't start using 'Guitar' in my name till about '85."

When asked about this, Ames claims, "He's the one that told me he always played with T-Bone there. I thought I was doing him a favor. Those posters get them tremendous publicity."

Hughes, who joins the chorus denying ever having signed contracts with Ames, has managed to receive some compensation from Home Cooking. "I called him about [an] album, about my royalties and I think one time he sent me $150," says Hughes. "He didn't send me no write-out. The second time he supposed to bring my royalties by my ex-manager's, and instead of bringing some money he brought a box of 25 albums for him to peddle. I got magazines from all over the country and Europe, where his ads are in there, T-shirts, posters, all kind of stuff. If you wouldn't frequent these magazines, you wouldn't know."

DEBORAH NICHOLSON: "HE WAS ASKING ME IF I KNEW ANYTHING ABOUT MY DAD HAVING TAPES THAT WEREN'T PUBLISHED YET."

After being released from Latuna prison, Ames moved into a small apartment near South Shepherd and Sul Ross. Visitors recall that the apartment was almost completely filled with boxes of reel-to-reel tapes the Houston Police Department had seized in 1975 and then returned because they were not related to the charges of child pornography against Ames. The decade of trials and appeals depleted Ames' finances — at his 1981 trial he pleaded poverty and received court-appointed counsel — so as soon as he was released from prison, he began making the rounds. Using his legendary charm to gloss over the reason for his long absence, he found many artists who believed his tale of imminent fame and fortune. Ames also made the acquaintance of Andy Brown. It was, for Ames at least, a most fortuitous event.

Today, at 24, Andy Brown is a tall, red-headed human encyclopedia of postwar Texas music. Sitting in his Heights apartment, he played mint-condition Duke/Peacock 78's for a visitor and reflected on his senior year at Lamar High School, when, consumed by a passion for blues and R&B, he found in the phone book a name he recognized from the album covers.

The name was Roy Ames, and when Brown called him, he found Ames to be cordial and patient in answering the 17-year-old's questions about artists both obscure and famous. So when, on New Year's Day of 1988, Brown made the "find of a lifetime," one of the first people the excited teenager called was Roy Ames.

"Have you heard about somebody walking into the old Duke/Peacock building and finding all the original pictures?" Brown says now. "That was me. It was an incredible find. Just hundreds of never-before-seen photos and stuff." In the back of the long-abandoned Fifth Ward building was a closet filled with box after box of Duke/Peacock publicity photos and negatives, royalty checks endorsed by the artists, statements, invoices, letters, telegrams — a treasure trove for memorabilia collectors. When Brown told Ames of the find, Ames arranged to sell usage rights for the photos to Ace Records in England, a deal that netted Brown around $1,000. Brown doesn't know how much the rights were actually sold for, but at the time he was satisfied with the payment — especially since he retained the photos themselves.

Eventually, however, Brown began having reservations about "exploiting" what he viewed as a near-sacred trust, even though he had rescued the items from almost certain destruction in an open, crumbling building that had been vacant for over a decade.

"After that, [Ames] said, 'I've got this deal worked out with P-vine to sell them [photo] rights,' " remembers Brown. "I said okay — hell, I was broke — but I was feeling kind of guilty, too. I didn't like making money off that stuff. So I took it all over to his house one day and the next thing I knew, faster than you could blink, he auctioned it all off and sold it to God knows who for how much money. And cut me out completely. His explanation was that I had got my cut the first time we leased the photos."

This was vastly different from what Brown had planned. "I felt guilty that first time after we sold the rights to Ace, making this money off of these guys," he says. "I got the feeling I didn't want to do this anymore. I was going to just keep the pictures over at my house and show them to whoever wanted to see them." Despite having been relieved of the music-archivist's equivalent of a sunken galleon, Brown's biggest gripe about the fate of the Duke/Peacock find is not financial, but historical. "He didn't give a fuck about keeping the pictures here in town," Brown complains. "He just wanted to sell them."

Continued on page 12

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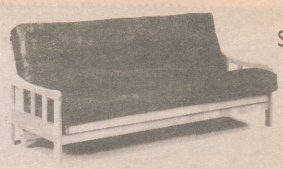

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Case of the Blues

Continued from page 10

Brown describes Ames as someone "who never questioned what he was doing, never felt a tinge of conscience and was unshakable in his belief that he was right." Ames, Brown says, "could have been the greatest used-car salesman on Earth."

While the Duke/Peacock find was a boon for Ames, it wasn't his main focus. As he built his reputation as the international source for authentic Houston blues recordings and photos, Ames continued to add to his stash of audio and video recordings. About three years after his release from jail, he persuaded a number of Houston artists to perform at a blues showcase at Rockefeller's. The artists were told that the purpose of the event was to shoot a concert video that would establish Houston as the blues capital of the world.

What eventually came of the project was a CD called *Saturday Night at Rockefeller's*; its contents have been widely anthologized on Home Cooking compilations. Several noted Houston artists appear on the CD, and all insist that they were unaware of the recording until it appeared in stores.

"Sonny Boy" Terry Jerome was among those at the Rockefeller's concert. "We were told it was for a video," Jerome says. "Nobody knew it was going to be on a CD, and nobody signed a release form or anything. He had some little two-tracker backstage. The next thing we know, the guy's putting out CDs left and right on everybody. The original songs is what really pisses people off. Getting original music published is heinous. And when you do a live version of a cover, you're supposed to sign a release form or he can't put it out."

A version of what Jerome calls "an original instrumental that I'd been playing around town for years" appears as "Mr. Rockefeller," published by the Ames-owned Clarity Music, on *Texas Harmonica Greats*, one of the Home Cooking CDs to use the Rockefeller's material. Jerome says, "I had never published it. It was just a blues instrumental, but he didn't have my permission."

Another tune published by Clarity that appears on *Saturday Night at Rockefeller's* is "Wigs & Pigfeet." According to Kinny Abair, another of the Rockefeller's performers, the song is actually "Wig Song," written by the near-deified Sam "Lightnin'" Hopkins. Although he was interviewed at length, the normally coherent Abair could not be quoted for this article because whenever anyone mentions Roy Ames he lapses into a loud, frenzied patois that is completely incomprehensible, aside from frequent use of the word "motherfucker."

When asked about the Rockefeller's album, Ames dismisses the musicians' complaints as "grumbling." His memories of the arrangements for the evening are much different from those of the artists. "What I did there was simply hire musicians to come and put on a show," Ames says. "And I informed them that we were going to make a CD and a video of it, and anyone that tells you otherwise — they weren't listening, because everybody was there."

"I paid everybody at the session," he adds. "They certainly knew I was cutting a CD, because I had a portable recording studio there. I mean it was expensive. I sat back there and paid everybody by check. I wrote checks back there for over an hour after the show." Ames was unsure whether the artists had signed contracts or "maybe I just wrote a little something on the check."

When asked if the appearance fee he paid the artists also purchased the publishing rights to the songs they performed, he responded, "Oh, boy, are you asking a technical question." When the issue was raised again a few minutes later, he responded, "No, the publishing rights are completely different." When he was informed that one source of "grumbling" was Sonny Boy Terry, who was concerned about the Clarity publishing on his song, Ames said, "then he needs to come in and sign a writer's contract."

What upsets many artists more than the question of royalties is the question of quality. Among the 8,000 master tapes reportedly in Ames' possession there is thought to be some truly awful stuff — tapes that would have been wiped clean with a magnet if the artist or his heirs had had any say in the matter. And even when everything clicks, any recording is going to need some polishing, some engineering somewhere to make it the best it can be. But all that costs money.

In 1955, vocalist Jimmy "T-99" Nelson decided to get serious about being married and to just dabble with music. In 1965, Ames asked Nelson to do some recording just to see what happened. Since the session would feature Arnett Cobb on sax, Calvin Owens on trumpet and Spooky Dancer on organ — an all-star Houston lineup — Nelson agreed to lay down a few sides without a contract.

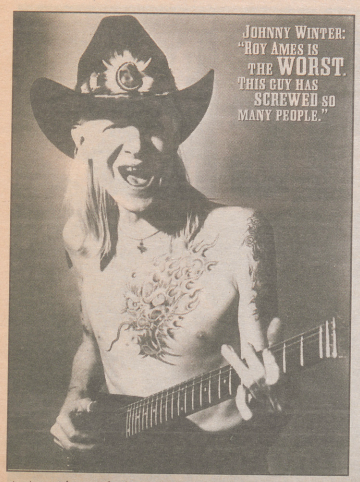
Although Nelson signed a one-year contract with Ames five years later, his sessions still were not released, and he assumed that the material was dead. "I did these things for Ames, and then he went off to prison for so many years," Nelson explains. "That was stuff I was sure would hit the big time again. This guy had it under wraps." When Ames was released from prison, Nelson had hopes that the sessions might be resurrected. As it happens, they were, though not in the manner Nelson might have wanted. Shortly after his release, Ames began shopping the old tapes. And it was only when he found a buyer — Ace Records in England — that Nelson finally lost faith in Ames.

> WHEN AMES WAS RELEASED FROM PRISON, NELSON HAD HOPES THAT THE SESSIONS MIGHT BE RESURRECTED. AS IT HAPPENS, THEY WERE, THOUGH NOT IN THE MANNER NELSON MIGHT HAVE WANTED.

According to Nelson, it wasn't because "I haven't received one dime, not even session money." It was because "Roy sold the thing like it was. One of the cuts the drummer drops the stick on the cuff. The trumpet's too close to the mike, and some places it wasn't close enough. They could have fixed all that." The album was released as *Hot Tamale Man*, so named for an original song on which Nelson says he holds the copyright. Nelson was aware that the album had been released by P-vine and Ace. What he didn't know, at least until recently, was that the album was available on Home Cooking — and that that version said all the songs were the property of Clarity Music.

When informed of Nelson's surprise at the album, Ames replied, "I wouldn't know where he is or how to find him. Is he still alive?" (As it happens, Jimmy "T-99" Nelson's phone number is the same as it was the day he first cut *Hot Tamale Man*.)

Holly Bullamore, manager for Johnny Clyde Copeland, is another who reports con-



stant surprise at what's available on Home Cooking. She says that every time she visits her favorite Chicago record store, she finds more Home Cooking reissues from sessions Copeland cut both decades ago and fairly recently. Somehow, as independent studios opened and closed and merged, dubs of forgettable sessions — sessions that Bullamore calls "really poor quality" — found their way to Ames.

Like many people in the industry, Bullamore is absolutely baffled by Ames' actions. Copeland, who appears on many Home Cooking CDs, was once hired to do a commercial for Miller Lite. On Home Cooking's *The Three Sides of Johnny Clyde Copeland* is a song entitled "Commercial." Bullamore marvels, "He took the audio track from a television commercial, put it on a recording and put publishing on it."

Ames' audacity may come back to haunt him. If he had stayed without putting out records by people who are either deceased or too poor to follow up on their complaints, he might have spent his life being the gossip of the music community.

But now an attempt to profit from his best-known connection could cause serious problems. Roy Ames' claim to fame, his credentials when questioned, is that he was Johnny Winter's manager and producer back when Winter was an unknown. (Never mentioned is that dealing with Ames convinced Winter that if he didn't get out of Houston he would remain an unknown forever.) And it may be Johnny Winter material that causes the roof to fall in on Roy Ames.

Relix Records in New York specializes in archival reissues. The company signed contracts with Ames in the late '80s and early '90s that gave Relix exclusive worldwide distribution rights to four Johnny Winter recordings that Ames said dated from 1967–70 — a time when, according to Ames, Winter was under his contract. Relix then turned around and sub-leased one of the recordings to the Castle label in Great Britain.

Not long after, Thunderbolt, a subsidiary of the Magnum Music Group, contacted Castle and accused them of illegally using Johnny Winter material that, in England, belonged to Magnum. The source of their ownership claim? Contracts with Roy Ames.

After Thunderbolt contacted Ames to find out what was going on, Ames' attorney accused Relix of breaching their contract by distributing Winter's music overseas. But according to Thomas Canova, an attorney with Relix's counsel of Pennie & Edmonds, "We looked at the contracts, and it was pretty clear to us that we were the ones entitled to sell internationally." According to Canova, the problem wasn't Relix, it was Ames — who was seen as selling distribution rights that had already been bought by someone else.

To further complicate matters, one of the recordings that Relix leased from Ames was released by Relix as a live Johnny Winter CD called *Walking by Myself*, complete with liner notes written by Ames himself saying what a great 1969 concert it was.

Canova's voice rises with outrage as he remembers a letter concerning the CD received by a music magazine. "Relix is engaged in false advertising," the letter said. "This is a concert from 1977 from the Calderon Concert Hall in Long Island." As it happened, Canova says, the letter was right. That meant Relix had released a CD with music to which they had no legal right. Distribution rights to recordings made by Johnny Winter in 1977 are owned by Sony, not by Ames. So Ames wouldn't have been able to license those rights to Relix.

"We were hoodwinked," Canova says, "and now we're infringing on the rights of Sony. Those are big boys, we don't want to fight with them. And Roy Ames not only distributed material he had exclusively licensed to Relix worldwide, he had the nerve to come out on Home Cooking with *Gangster of Love*, which is a complete knock-off of material that is licensed to Relix."

With Sony in the picture, small squabbles could easily escalate to major ones. And there are more than a few squabbles appearing on the horizon. Jim Bateman, who has managed Clarence "Gatemouth" Brown for the last 20 years, says he has an attorney looking into issues related to Ames. And Paul Verberne, a Houston lawyer with an interest in entertainment law, says he's heard that a move is afoot to track down performers with complaints about Ames to see if a joint action of some sort might be possible. And George Jacobs, a B.B. King fan who prosecuted Ames when Jacobs was with the Harris County district attorney's office in the mid-'70s, has expressed curiosity over how someone with felony convictions could legally be involved in an import and export business.

Meanwhile, Ames continues operating Home Cooking and Clarity, getting notice in the blues magazines, fielding complaints from Houston musicians, filling mail orders for CDs and collectibles, and saying that he's done nothing illegal, that misunderstandings happen. As the lawyers begin to circle, he may well consider everything that's happening to be a big mistake. If so, he could well be right. Only the mistake this time would have been his. HP

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